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NEWS

FROM YOUR MUSEUM

THE ROYAL ONTARIO MUSEUM

Know your Museum better

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WHAT IS THE CANADIAN SHIELD?

Here is the answer which the geologists of the Royal Ontario Museum give to this question. It is an area of ancient rocks that underlies about one-half of Canada. It is called a shield because it has in a broad way the shape of a low dome with later rocks around its rim. It is thus something like the old-fashioned shield carried by warriors. The rocks run in age from about two billion years to 500 million years and it required about three-quarters of all geological time for them to form. The Shield was, in ancient times, a land of numerous and large volcanoes, it had great mountains and violent earthquakes, but the mountains and volcanoes have been worn away to mere stumps of their former grandeur by rain, streams and glacial action. In contrast to the early conditions, this great area is now freer from earthquakes than any other area of its size in the world. There are relics of much primitive life, mainly plants, in the Shield, but few fossils of animals. It is one of the great sources of metals because of an abundance of igneous rocks, but it lacks coal and oil which were not formed until later times.

Rocks like those of the Shield underlie much of North America and if one drilled deep enough on the prairies or in southern Ontario such rocks would be found under the sediments.

LILIES THAT BLOOM IN THE SEA

Many will agree that water lilies are among the most beautiful of our pond plants. Their delicate fragrance is a gentle reminder of mid-summer outings to Nature's quieter, unfrequented spots. In the animal world another kind of water "lily," known as the Crinoid or Sea Lily, is likewise noted for its exquisite beauty. In the Royal Ontario Museum may be seen many examples of these lily-like animals which are related to the starfish and sea urchins.

A sea lily has a long, jointed, limy stem which fastens it to the sea bottom. The soft animal is lodged in a cup which is made up of many limy plates. Radiating from the upper margin of the cup are numerous, flexible arms, the animal's food-gathering device.

Sea lilies were more common in the prehistoric seas than they are at the present time. During the Coal Age particularly, over two hundred and fifty million years ago, the seas teemed with these creatures. The comminuted remains of their fossilized shells are the chief constituents of many of the economically important limestones of the world.

SHELLS AS ANCIENT BADGES

In the collections of the Royal Ontario Museum is a large pierced pearl shell with an Egyptian inscription on it. The use of the shell is not certain. One belief is that the Egyptian archer used it as a badge. Other shells have also been used as insignia. Crusaders returning from the Holy Land wore on their tunics a scallop shell as a badge of honour.

"TORPEDOES" OF THE PAST

In England and Western Europe cigar-shaped "stones," commonly found in clay pits, have long been familiar objects. The term belemnite, which was early applied to them, suggests a dart or thunderbolt. The Royal Ontario Museum has on exhibition a few of these torpedo-like structures. They actually represent the fossilized remains of a portion of the internal shell of an extinct type of shell-fish, closely related to the modern squid and cuttlefish, and more remotely related to the devil fish and pearly nautilus. These fossils at times reach a length of eighteen inches with a diameter of more than an inch.

Like the modern torpedo, the belemnites were streamlined for quick action. They were probably as deadly in their attacks on their unfortunate victims as are the similar shaped, man-made weapons of today. They lived in great numbers in the seas at the same time the mighty dinosaurs dominated the lands, and along with the dinosaurs, they have been extinct for fifty million years.

WILD ANIMALS IN URBAN ONTARIO

Information, received at the Royal Ontario Museum in answer to questionnaires, reveals that the red fox is abundant in southern Ontario. It and other wild animals of moderate size are found in the outskirts of our cities. The slow-moving skunk which depends on its scent gland for protection is commonly killed on the suburban highways. The raccoon, too, is occasionally a dweller of the urban fringes. For examples, the Royal Ontario Museum has received specimens captured in the outskirts of Toronto in recent years. Even the red fox has been seen in outlying parts of the city. Wild nature still holds on near our doorstep.

LOCAL MUSEUMS: STAFF

The most important components of any museum are not noble halls and costly treasures, but rather the men and women who direct its activites. To them falls the difficult task of interpreting the museum's collections by means of displays, lectures and writings (popular and technical). Of course, the small museum staff will not have specialized information bearing on some fields it must touch. At the beginning, too, it may lack experience in the organization and planning of its work. It must rely on older museums for help.

The committee of directors of the Royal Ontario Museum recently resolved to "place the benefit of its experience at the disposal of any local group within the province wishing advice in the matter of museum organization or management."

If money is made available for small museums, then arrangements must be made whereby prospective museum workers can be trained at some large museum.